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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: BUILDING
MOMENTUM, COALITIONS TO MAKE THEM INEVITABLE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A clear pattern exists in Lebanon of Syria's allies trying to prevent free and fair elections. In summer 2004, efforts by the Lebanese and the international community failed to prevent the Syrian-directed, three-year term extension of Lebanon's president, Emile Lahoud. Lahoud's shameless pandering to Syria haunts Lebanon to this day. By contrast, in spring 2005, local, regional, and international partners bonded together in the aftermath of former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination to overpower the stiff opposition to legislative elections by Syria's Lebanese allies. The March 14 majority that emerged from the May-June 2005 elections made Fouad Siniora prime minister and continues to provide the essential political backing to the Siniora cabinet.

2. (C) Today, with Lahoud's amended term finally approaching its end, Syria's allies in Lebanon are fearful of the implications of a six-year presidency in the hands of March 14. Thus, they are up to their old tricks of trying to manipulate elections or cancel them. They are relying on a strategy to frighten people about chaos or vacuum in the presidency in hopes that a so-called compromise solution of their design suddenly appears palatable to our March 14 allies. With no guarantees of who will be PM in the years to come, much rests on the positions of Lebanon's next president, including the fate of UNSCR 1701, the next legislative elections, implementation of the Special Tribunal, and so on. We need to build a strong partnership with the new president, but we must first work to ensure that presidential elections take place. In our view, we will, as in spring 2005, need to exercise leadership to build the coalitions and momentum that make it impossible to avoid the election of a credible presidential candidate. End summary.

PRESIDENT ESSENTIAL TO ENSURING
SUSTAINABILITY OF USG POLICIES IN LEBANON

3. (C) For the USG, Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections are of primary importance. Lebanon's next president will help decide whether the democratic and independence gains since 2005 are strengthened, stagnate, or, instead, are weakened. The president -- elected by parliament -- has a single, six-year constitutional term (Lahoud's extension notwithstanding, as well as the similar extension of Lahoud's immediate predecessor, Elias Hrawi), with powers including a veto-proof signature on cabinet

formation decrees. This provides him enormous leverage over the composition of cabinets that may come and go during his tenure. By working for or against the March 14 majority, the president will also influence the outcome of 2009 legislative elections. Regarding UNSCR 1701 implementation, if he sides with the PM rather than (as Emile Lahoud does now) Hizballah, he can help tip the balance of power in favor of the state (including control of the Lebanese-Syrian border) and against militias. Lebanon's president will also have an impact on Lebanon's cooperation with the Special Tribunal on Lebanon.

SINIORA LEAVING; 6-YEAR PRESIDENT
SHOULD BE OUR NEW PARTNER

14. (C) For two years now, our primary partner inside the GOL has been Fouad Siniora. Now, we need to think about a partnership with a credible, six-year president. Per the constitution, Siniora's cabinet falls and must be replaced with the start of a new presidential term. Siniora may return as PM in a new cabinet, but that would require Saad Hariri (who controls the largest bloc in parliament) to cede the position to him again -- something Hariri, unless prompted by the Saudis, would be unlikely to do, given his concern that Siniora's reputation is eclipsing his own. Ideally, we will have a partnership with both the PM and the president, but we know from the outset that the president should be in office for six full years, whereas the PM can be replaced. Moreover, while Saad Hariri as PM would be generally friendly to the policy lines taken by Siniora, he is inexperienced and thus unpredictable, making our relationship with Lebanon's next president that much more important.

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VARIOUS SCHEMES TO TWIST
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

15. (C) Under normal circumstances, the March 14 parliamentary bloc should have no difficulty electing a president of its choice: were parliament to convene on September 25 as scheduled with at least two-thirds of the members present, March 14 could elect its choice for president -- assuming March 14 can united around a single candidate -- on the second ballot, requiring only a simple majority. Unfortunately, extremely powerful forces are working against the election (by parliament) of a credible, six-year president before the 11/24 conclusion of Emile Lahoud's term in office. The Syrians and their allies in Lebanon are utilizing a variety of means to ensure that the increasingly slim March 14 parliamentary majority cannot elect a president of its choice:

-- Playing with the quorum to create a vacuum: having persuaded the majority of Lebanese (including influential voices like the Maronite Patriarch) that a two-thirds quorum is required to hold presidential elections, the Hizballah-Aoun alliance may fail to show up for presidential elections, creating a vacuum in the presidency. If March 14 would elect a president with only a simple majority quorum (an approach many March 14 members themselves now question), the president will be deemed illegitimate by a significant portion of the Lebanese. Alternatively, but less likely given Michel Aoun's recent success in the Metn elections (making it more difficult for him to challenge parliament's legitimacy), the March 8-Aoun forces could physically block MPs access to parliament (as happened to prevent the election of Suleiman Franjieh in 1988).

-- Forming a second government: While Lebanon's constitution specifies that in the case of a vacancy in the presidency the cabinet shall assume the presidential functions temporarily, Emile Lahoud has stated that, as he views the Siniora cabinet as illegal, he will not hand power

to it. This could signal that, without a president elected by parliament with a two-thirds quorum, Lahoud will carry through with the threat to name a second cabinet. While that cabinet would have no constitutional legitimacy, it would have recognition in key parts of Lebanon, including the area south of the Litani. Furthermore, because several key ministries and the revenue-contributing phone companies are geographically located in Hizballah strongholds, the opposition would gain de facto control of their operations.

-- Promoting a military solution: This is a variation on the second cabinet idea, by which Lahoud would, upon leaving office, hand his powers to the six-person Higher Military Council or another military body temporarily. That military body would then try to organize presidential elections, perhaps by dissolving parliament and holding new legislative elections first. Some (including Parliament Speaker Berri) suggest that the military coup will be prompted by any move by March 14 to elect a president with a simple parliamentary majority only -- meaning that March 14 would be blamed for this turn of events. Others say that the military solution would not count as a coup d'etat, because it would only happen if backed by a majority of Lebanese (who might be intimidated into fearing any other choice).

-- Delaying the presidency through a National Unity Government (NUG) "parachute": Many of the pro-Syrian opposition figures ask about the rush toward presidential elections, saying that it is more important to form a NUG first as a "parachute" in case presidential elections do not happen on time. Given that presidential elections start September 25, the emphasis on a NUG now strikes us as evidence that the pro-Syrians want to delay presidential elections, with the NUG (in which the pro-Syrians will have veto and "toppling" power) to govern in the meantime. The idea might be to delay presidential elections until after new legislative elections, with the pro-Syrians hoping that a new legislative majority will emerge to elect a president friendly to the Asad regime.

-- Setting up a transitional presidency: Some argue that, while the political divide here makes a six-year presidency impossible, a two-year presidency can fill the void. Like

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the emphasis on a NUG now, this is a ploy to postpone full presidential elections for a six-year term until after legislative elections. This scenario has the double advantage for those hoping to block a March 14 presidency by placating Aoun -- who could still hold out hopes of becoming president in two years -- and aligning Lebanon's political timetable with the U.S. presidential elections, which the opposition is counting on to produce a less anti-Syrian U.S. policy.

-- Insisting on a Michel Aoun presidency: Some of the most widely reviled figures in Lebanon such as former Environment Minister Wi'am Wihab claim that Michel Aoun is the only possible president. Given what a polarizing figure Aoun is, we believe that this tactic is intended to make a solution harder, not easier, to reach. (As for Aoun himself, we think he doesn't mind a vacuum, believing that he can exploit the Christian outrage over a vacancy in the Christian presidency to rebuild his popular base and propel himself into Baabda Palace later.)

-- Creating a security nightmare: By reviving assassinations, provoking new uprising in Palestinian camps to exhaust the LAF, setting off bombs to terrorize the civilian population, those fearful of a March 14 president could tip the balance through violence toward some kind of military solution. Alternatively, assassinations (and resulting intimidation) of more March 14 MPs could further chip away at March 14's slim majority, perhaps eliminating it altogether. We also should watch for signs of another high-profile assassination of a major figure like Walid

Jumblatt as a way to derail elections and lead to chaos that will reinforce a call for a "military solution." Indeed, the closer Lebanon gets to a presidential election, the more dangerous the situation becomes for March 14 figures. If there is no president elected within ten days of the end of the president's mandate, in fact, parliament is considered to be automatically in session -- presumably dispensing with quorum questions and thus increasing the likelihood of terrorism and murder to prevent a March 14 candidate from being elected.

-- Using all of the above to frighten everyone into accepting a "compromise" president: We believe that this is probably the current game plan of the pro-Syrians. LAF Commander Sleiman is the current front-runner in a long list of those who are touted as possible compromise presidents, as less-bad options to any of the possibilities listed above. While this may be the option ultimately pursued, one suspects that this appeals to the pro-Syrians because they believe that the compromise candidate, whatever his consensus clothing, is actually aligned with Syria. We note, in fact, that LAF Commander Sleiman's name has been proposed as part of many of the other options listed above.

ELECTIONS THWARTED AND SUCCESSFUL, IN SUMMER 2004 AND SPRING 2005

16. (C) In summer 2004, some Lebanese publicly (including the Christian "Qornet Shehwan" movement opposed to Syrian rule and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt) and others privately (including then PM Rafiq Hariri) began exploring how to ensure free and fair presidential elections that autumn. The international community got involved, including by passing on 9/2/04 UNSCR 1559 declaring the UNSC's "support for a free and fair electoral process in Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence." The following day, however, Syrian pressure lead to Lebanon's parliament (despite a walk-out by Walid Jumblatt's bloc and many Christian MPs) amending the Lebanese constitution to extend Emile Lahoud's by three years. Rafiq Hariri was murdered just over five months later.

17. (S) The following spring, with Lebanon's parliamentary term about to expire, Syria's Lebanese allies again opposed free and fair elections. Hizballah, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, President Lahoud, PM Mikati (initially), and the various pro-Syrian players and parties hoped to postpone the May-June 2005 legislative elections. They argued that, because of the trauma of Rafiq Hariri's murder, Lebanon's potential instability after the Syrian troop withdrawal, and (most plausibly) the need to draw up a fair election law,

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Lebanon's existing parliament -- dominated by pro-Syrian figures -- should be extended for months or even years. We knew from other channels that pro-Syrians wanted to delay elections until they were assured of again winning a parliamentary majority, something that was impossible in spring 2005. This worked out better than the aborted presidential elections in autumn 2004: the May-June legislative elections, held on time, produced a solidly pro-March 14 majority of 72 seats out of 128. While that majority -- due to death, defections, and by-elections -- has dropped from 72 to 68 MPs, March 14 (assuming bloc discipline and resolution of the quorum issue) could still elect a March 14 president, should the quorum question be resolved.

COALITIONS AND MOMENTUM LEAD TO SUCCESS IN 2005

18. (C) The question is why we failed in 2004 but succeeded in 2005 in promoting elections. In the aftermath of Hariri's murder and the dramatic 3/14/05 "Cedar Revolution"

demonstration, it was possible for us to assemble stronger local, regional, and international coalitions in favor of legislative elections. Lebanese opposition to Syria's domination came out of the closet in droves. We used these coalitions to build momentum that ultimately made it impossible for the pro-Syrians to evade the legislative elections. There was no choice but to proceed with elections. Inside Lebanon, political leaders (from what became known as March 14 only later) mobilized rallies, and motivated youth organized an ongoing downtown demonstration in support of elections. Regionally, various diplomatic efforts won Arab support for elections. Internationally, France and the USG used a strong partnership in building a climate for elections. With President Emile Lahoud's signature needed for the election decree to be considered valid, we even lobbied Lahoud directly (with Ambassadors Emie and Feltman breaking their boycott of Lahoud for one-on-one meetings urging his support) and indirectly, with Arab pressure applied to Lahoud.

ONE KEY CONCESSION:
THE ELECTION LAW

¶9. (C) But the push for legislative elections on time did include one key concession to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, in order to win Berri and Hizballah's agreement: the deeply flawed 2000 election law (drafted by the Syrians) remained in place. For those advocating elections, reverting to the existing law prevented the pro-Syrians from delaying elections indefinitely through endless debate of a new law. For Berri and Hizballah, the 2000 election law ensured their continued domination of south Lebanon, with independent voices impossible to emerge given the enormity of south Lebanon's two electoral districts. Undoubtedly, use of the 2000 election law was the least principled and most expeditious part of the spring 2005 deal on elections, and it has given the pro-Syrians and Michel Aoun a pretext by which to raise nagging questions about the parliament's legitimacy.

TRYING TO SHAME CHRISTIAN MPS
INTO SHOWING UP FOR PARLIAMENT

¶10. (C) Today, we need to work again to see that our local, regional, and international coalitions are all pushing in the same direction. With March 14 leaders able to turn out the Sunni and Druse MPs to parliament, and with Hizballah and Amal determined to withhold quorum unless a consensus president is agreed upon in advance, the key is getting the Christian MPs to show up. If the Aoun bloc Christians are pressured by local and international religious and political forces into joining their March 14 Christian MP colleagues in the presidential elections, then the two-thirds quorum seen by many people as required for elections is achievable. Getting the Aoun bloc Christians to show up would also embarrass the Shia MPs: would they really want to be seen as the only group boycotting the elections for Lebanon's highest Christian office? We will work with our March 14 contacts to see what incentives there might be for Aoun's deputies to show up -- whether there will be places for them in future legislative tickets and future cabinets -- but sticks are needed as well. We hope that the Vatican can, essentially,

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shame the Christian MPs into refusing to participate in the creation of a vacuum in the only Christian presidency in the Middle East.

EMPHASIZING PARTNERSHIP WITH FRANCE
TO KEEP SYRIA'S ALLIES OFF BALANCE

¶11. (C) Key to all of this, too, is our partnership with France. Pro-Syrians in Lebanon are hinting that French policy is softening toward Syria, which makes March 14

activists nervous. We don't want March 14 MPs to concede prematurely to a "compromise" presidential candidate because they fear the international resolve is weakening. In addition, one major lesson from spring 2005 (compared to our summer 2004 experience) is that it is easier to achieve our results if Syria is off-balance. We defer to Embassy Damascus for analysis of Syrian positions, but we note that, just prior to the 2005 legislative elections, Syria felt nervous enough under local, regional, and international pressure to withdraw its troops and close its intelligence offices in Lebanon. Now, despite the May passage by the UNSC of the Special Tribunal on Lebanon, Syria seems to be feeling confident that it can wait out the current U.S. administration and flirt with France and other EU countries in the meantime. By finding public occasions to underscore our continuing partnership with France on behalf of Lebanon's independence -- and specifically on behalf of presidential elections on time -- we can help keep Syria and its Lebanese allies from complacency.

AVOIDING THE "NAME GAME"
AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

¶12. (C) We may need to adjust our tactics in the weeks ahead, to be able to respond nimbly to local developments. But, for now, we strongly believe that we should continue to refrain from supporting specific candidates. Given the inevitable pro-Syrian propaganda, we would do our friends no favors by mentioning their names. We should, instead, rely on our allies in Lebanon's parliament to ensure that a credible president emerges (or that no U.S. red lines are crossed). So the focus should remain on how to make sure that the parliamentary session electing a president takes place.

¶13. (C) We also note that our March 14 allies and Maronite Patriarch Sfeir remain opposed to constitutional amendments affecting the presidency (either by changing the length of the term or by waiving the cooling-off period for certain candidates, including front-runner Sleiman). This opposition to a constitutional amendment is consistent with the international view from 2005, when UNSCR 1559 was passed. If there is truly a Lebanese -- vice Syrian -- consensus that the constitution should be amended, we would be in no position to block it. But, now, there is no such consensus, and we suggest working with France and others to pass the message that we concur with the Patriarch's insistence on respecting the constitution.

¶14. (C) At some point, we may also wish to let it be known that we and our allies will recognize a president who is elected by the simple majority in the last ten days of Lahoud's mandate, when parliament comes into session automatically if no president has been elected. This is an option to hold in reserve for now, in order not to provoke security problems by those fear a March 14 presidency. But the knowledge that the international community is about to recognize a March 14 figure may be leverage to force MPs from Michel Aoun's bloc who are looking for a way off their sinking Aoun ship to side with the majority on electing a new president.

¶15. (SBU) In messages in the weeks to come, we will continue to share ideas on what tactical moves we might consider in order to build the momentum for presidential elections on time and by which the Lebanese MPs have the opportunity themselves to choose Lebanon's next president.

FELTMAN